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Observing Bald Eagles at Nest Sites		
Revision: #3	Replaces: 4/22/99	Effective: 2/13/03

1. Purpose and Scope: Bald eagles, on the Federal list of Endangered and Threatened Wildlife and Plants, is officially listed as Threatened in the lower 48 States. However, the number of breeding pairs is increasing in many states, and delisting is possible within 5 years if this trend continues. Until delisting occurs, however, APHIS will need to continue to consult with the Fish and Wildlife Service on ways to protect eagles and nests near Program areas. Program activities have potentially 2 effects on eagles, direct or indirect toxicological effects, and disturbance. Buffers might be implemented to reduce the likelihood of both of these effects, and on-site observations might also be used to ensure program compliance with the buffers and to monitor eagle activity. This SOP outlines the procedures to be followed for observing eagles at the nest for signs of disturbance.

2. Supplies Required: To request supplies contact the Laboratory Environmental Monitoring Coordinator at the APHIS Analytical and Natural Products Chemistry Laboratory (ANPCL), in Gulfport, MS at (228) 863-8124.

2.1 Environmental Monitoring Plan

2.2 field log book (steno pad or hardbound notebook)

2.3 telescope, or very powerful binoculars (9x or 10x)

2.4 pen

2.5 portable tape-recorder (dictaphone) or video camera (optional - obtain locally)

3. Notes About Eagles: As long as eagles are on the Federal list of threatened and endangered species, it is illegal to harass or disturb them. Eagles can be sensitive to the presence of observers, but their behaviors are individualistic; some individuals are more sensitive than others. Many eagles (and other wildlife as well) perceive a person on foot as more of a threat than a person in a car at the same distance. With these points in mind, it is important to establish a location from which to observe the nest without disturbing the eagles.

This can be a difficult task. In some cases the eagles might not appear to be disturbed by the presence of an observer ¼ mi. away, but they might change their behavior in subtle ways. For example, a pair of eagles might have a routine of leaving a nest site at dawn and returning at 7:30. This would leave a period of time during which program activities could occur near

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the nest site without disturbing the adult eagles. However, the presence of an observer might cause the eagles to shift this time away from the nest in unpredictable ways. Therefore, a more distant observation location is recommended.

Program activities should be avoided near nests with young near the age of fledging. Fledging occurs at about 2 ½ months of age; the young are fully-feathered (with brown rather than white heads and tails), and the size of adults, or larger. These birds could be made to jump from the nest prematurely, thus jeopardizing their survival, if disturbed by aircraft flying over nearby fields.

The whole nesting cycle takes about 110 days, from first egg to last fledgling. Nesting season begins early in the southern United States; the earliest dates for eggs laid in nests are in November in Florida and Texas, with most nests starting in December through January. Nesting starts later in more northern latitudes.

4. Taking Notes, and Things to Observe: Review SOP #12, *Using a Field Log Book*. In your field log notebook, write down:

- 4.1 Location (including distance you are from nest)
- 4.2 Date
- 4.3 Time
- 4.4 Weather (cloud cover, wind direction and speed, temperature, precipitation)
- 4.5 Who (if anyone) is with you
- 4.6 Note why you are there, and what and when program activities (if any) are scheduled.
- 4.7 Time and method of treatment, chemical and application rate
- 4.8 Note whether buffers, if any, are established and clearly marked
- 4.9 Sketch the site and the GPS coordinates, note North, the nest, the treatment site, bodies of water, houses or out-buildings, and relevant distances between all of these features. Much better than a sketch would be to attach an annotated topographical map, or aerial photograph of the site along with your field log book entries. Use of still photographs or better still, a video, showing the ground cover and topography between the treatment site and the nest is very useful. This need not be done every time, unless conditions change.
- 4.10 Note the activities of the birds on a regular basis. If the birds are mostly sitting, resting, preening, make note of this every 10-15 minutes. Note any special activities, such as adults returning to the nest with food for young, perch

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changes, etc. If an eagle flies, note where it flew to, direction, interactions with other birds or eagles, etc.

4.11 Note the stage of the crop, and any activities in the vicinity of the nest by others, including the farmer. Note recent weather, what the farmer has been applying to his field in addition to program treatments, and by what means, etc.

4.12 Sign the field log book following each day's entries.

5. Evaluating Eagle Behavior: Some protection measures require the observer to monitor the activities of the eagles for signs of disturbance, and call off program activities if eagles appear disturbed. Be aware of the following eagle behaviors when program activities are taking place; they are probably signals that the birds are disturbed:

5.1 Change in behavior when the program begins, e.g. a perched bird takes to the air; appears agitated; stops preening; changes posture on perch from upright to a horizontal, ready-to-fly look.

5.2 Raptors and other birds often defecate right before taking off.

6. Distribution of Copies of Field Log Book: Periodically throughout the treatment program, or at intervals specified in the monitoring plan, photocopy the entries in the field log book, and send with any maps, aerial photographs, ground level photographs or videos, to:

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Environmental Monitoring Team
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Riverdale, MD 20737-1236